

## Cambridge Common

Cambridge Common is a remnant of the original Massachusetts Bay lands allotted to Newtowne in 1630. After 1634, when the General Court ordered each town to make a survey of all the land granted to its settlers, the ungranted land in Newtowne was administered by the Proprietors of Common Lands. The Common achieved its present dimensions in 1724 and the Proprietors of Common Lands deeded it to the town in 1769. Barracks were erected on the Common during the siege of Boston in 1775-76; their location and disposition are unknown. The Common was graded, enclosed and landscaped in 1830. Monuments began to appear in 1870. Barracks were again erected in 1918-19. During a renovation in 1976, paths were relocated, utilities were installed, and several monuments were moved.

Land suitable for cultivation and marshes valuable for salt hay were quickly granted to individual farmers, but some grazing lands were held in common for the benefit of the townsmen and smallholders, whose cows, goats, and swine were overseen by specially-appointed keepers. By the 1660s the remaining commons included the Ox Pasture (a 100-acre tract between present Massachusetts and Rindge avenues and Alewife Brook) and the Cow Common (86 acres between Garden and Linnaean streets and Massachusetts Avenue). The division of the Ox Pasture in 1703 reflected the continuing privatization of the landscape (see *Report Five: Northwest Cambridge*). Finally, in 1724 the proprietors reduced the Cow Common to approximately 16 acres by granting out the part between present Linnaean and Waterhouse streets; this area became known as the Lower Common, denoting its relatively remote relationship to the village.

The highways that entered the Common did not define its edges but went directly across its large, open expanse. The southern boundary was adjusted several times to follow the track of present Garden Street, which cut off a corner of the Common that was occupied in part by the

town pound, an enclosure for lost or strayed farm animals. In 1760, the proprietors granted the pound lot to a group of Anglicans who were organizing Christ Church. At the same time the town extended the Old Burying Ground further up Garden Street and gained a small lot for a school.

In November 1769, the proprietors ensured the continued existence of the Common as a public open space when they voted that

all the common Lands belonging to the proprietors, Frunting the Colledge, (commonly called the Town Commons) not heretofore granted or allotted to any particular person or persons or for any Special or particular Use, be ... granted to the Town of cambridge, to be used as a [military] Traineing Field to lye undivided, and to Remain for that use for Ever (*Proprietors' Records*, 362).

The Common had served as the town's training ground from a very early date. Captain Daniel Patrick, the commander of the Massachusetts Bay militia from 1632 to 1637, lived in the village, and after the militia was reorganized in 1636 the senior officers of the Middlesex Regiment were generally Cambridge men. Military service was required of all able-bodied men over 16; until about 1686, when retirement was allowed at 60, some served to a great age, unwilling or unable to pay a 5 shilling fee to be released from training. There were no barracks or permanent military facilities on the Common, but because of its central location Middlesex County militiamen assembled there for duty on the frontier or in the wars against the French.

After the British retreat from Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, Minutemen from all over New England mustered on Cambridge Common, and the town became the headquarters of the American army. Soldiers occupied the college buildings and officers lodged in nearby houses. A month later, more than a thousand men gathered on the Common before the Battle of

Bunker Hill. During the siege of Boston, which lasted through the winter of 1775-76, Cambridge become the principal military center of the colonies and was protected by a chain of forts along the river and across Dana Hill. Almost 10,000 men in ten regiments were encamped in and around the town, 5.including 640 in barracks built on the Common.

A drawing of about 1781 depicts one of the remaining barracks (Fig. 1). Rough tracks expressed travelers' desire lines; there were no defined roads or paths. There were no fences except for those erected by abutters to keep out the cattle, sheep, geese and even turkeys that were driven over the roads to market. After the completion of the West Boston Bridge in 1793, the Concord Turnpike in 1803, and Craigie's Bridge in 1809, the Common became a busy intersection of major routes between Boston and the upcountry towns (Fig. 2). To the dismay of neighbors, many drovers adopted the custom of resting their herds overnight before proceeding over the Great Bridge to the stockyards that had been established in Brighton during the war.

The Common was also used for revivals, elections, and public celebrations. Until the early 19th century it was the site of weeklong festivities at each Harvard commencement. James Russell Lowell compared the spectacle to an English fair: "For hither were come all the wonders of the world ... Here the mummy unveiled all her withered charms ... Here were the flying horses ... Hither came the Canadian giant ... In the trough of the town pump might be seen the mermaid ... For the bankrupt afternoons, there were peep shows, at One cent each" (James Russell Lowell, *Fireside Travels*, 58-59). The university's disgust at these crude revelries caused it to support the enclosure movement in the 1820s.

Nearby householders also disliked these riotous assemblages on the Common and opposed its use by upcountry drovers. In 1823 William Hilliard presented a petition to town meeting "to make certain improvements on the Common ... by setting out trees ... and fencing in certain parts ... not incompatible with the original grant to the town," at the petitioners' own

expense (Lucius Paige, *History of Cambridge*, 236). This proposal was no doubt inspired by the movement to landscape Boston Common and by similar plans in nearby Lexington and Medford, but it was not adopted. Seven years later, a new group of proponents (this time including Stephen Higginson, the recently-retired steward of Harvard College, who had worked with President Kirkland to enclose and landscape Harvard Yard), bypassed the town meeting and went directly to the General Court. The legislature authorized the enclosure in 1830, and empowered the committee to “level the surface of the ground, to plant trees, and to lay out and make walks within said enclosure ... leaving suitable and convenient avenues for the accommodation of persons who may have occasion to enter or pass over any part of said enclosure on foot” (*Mass. Special Laws*, vii, 7 in Paige, 236; Fig. 3).

The Common was graded, fenced, and landscaped (although the grass was not regularly mown to make a lawn until the 1870s). President Quincy contributed \$500 on behalf of the college, and the Common soon resembled the Yard, with a granite-post and rail fence and widely spaced elms (Fig. 3). All the roads across it except Massachusetts Avenue and Cambridge and Kirkland streets were eliminated, leaving an 8½-acre park surrounded by streets and three triangular parcels of about a half-acre each. (The narrow triangular park at Waterhouse Street and Massachusetts Avenue was not enclosed until 1860.)

The enclosure infuriated drovers as well as the proprietors of Craigie's Bridge and the Concord Turnpike. After the town meeting twice defeated remonstrances against the measure, Colonel Wellington and the towns of West Cambridge, Lexington, Waltham, and Watertown petitioned the legislature, claiming that the detour forced travelers “to pass said Common, in their travel to and from the city of Boston, by a circuitous route, considerably increasing the distance,” and that their rights were “impaired not ... to subserve the interests of the public, but to gratify the taste for ornament of a few individuals.” The Senate, however, found that

both parties admire the grounds as now laid out, the tasteful arrangement of the walks, and the promising growth of trees that line the margin, and are disposed in the centre of the Common. The entire consecration of this spot to such purposes of public ornament ... should be a permanent monument of the refinement and taste of the citizens of that part of Middlesex, and still further distinguish a village already widely and highly distinguished, ... and it is deeply to be regretted, that a controversy of so trifling a value ... as this of the diversion of at most four rods [64'] in one case, and fifteen [240'] in another, in two roads of no great travel, should frustrate or even hazard the gratification of an ambition so laudable (Mass. Senate 23, 1832, 11).

The opponents appealed, but in 1835 the Supreme Judicial Court found for the town, whose inhabitants “thus secured in perpetuity, for themselves and their descendants, a spacious and pleasant park, rich in historical associations” (Paige, 238).<sup>1</sup>

Once landscaped and beautified, the Common became firmly associated in the public mind with a compelling patriotic legend. General George Washington arrived in Cambridge on July 2, 1775 to take command of the American army; the next day, as one soldier reported in his diary, the troops “turned out Early In the Morning [and] Got in Redinefs to Receive the General” (Sleeper, July 3, 1775). Somehow this event became associated with a particular tree near the northwest corner of the Common, one of a dozen elms that were planted along Garden and Linnaean streets about 1700. The Washington Elm became widely venerated as a living link to the early years of the Republic. The image of the tree was reproduced on countless postcards and

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<sup>1</sup> Justice Shaw construed the Proprietors' grant as meaning that the land should not be appropriated to private use and that no distribution or appropriation of it should be made of it inconsistent with its use as a training field (Wellington et al. petitioners, 16 Pickering 87). Opponents of monuments and other structures on the Common have often cited this finding, but with little success.

souvenirs, and as time passed the scene became ever more elaborate in the popular imagination. The popular hysteria generated by the demise of the Washington Elm in 1923 prompted a backlash among historians, who sought to separate fact from fiction.

Monuments had begun to accumulate on the Common in 1870. A civic debate over an appropriate memorial to the 346 Cambridge men who died in the Civil War began soon after Appomattox. Some strongly advocated a new municipal building with a memorial hall. Others preferred a monument in Cambridge Cemetery, but the Common was chosen because of its size, central location, and historical associations. At Harvard University, the opposite occurred; proponents of a Memorial Hall, led by Charles Eliot Norton, prevailed over those who wished to see a triumphal monument.

Planning began in January 1869, when Mayor Charles Hicks Saunders charged the Common Council and the Board of Aldermen with the task of erecting a monument on the "flagstaff-common" (now Flagstaff Park). A committee instead chose the "large common" and resolved to "build an edifice, that, while it would suitably commemorate those whose names and services we desired to cherish and perpetuate, should be creditable to us as a work of art, and worthy of the historical character of Cambridge" (City of Cambridge, *Soldier's Monument*, 57).

A competition attracted thirty-four designs from twenty-two artists. Advised by Nathaniel J. Bradlee, a Boston architect, the committee selected a proposal from Cyrus and Darius Cobb, Malden twins who had served in the 44th Massachusetts Regiment. Cyrus was a sculptor who also practiced law; Darius was a portrait painter. Second place went to Joseph R. Richards, a Cambridge architect who had designed several schools for the city. The committee's recommendation was contested by the Common Council, which favored the local man. The Cobbs allied with Thomas Silloway, a church architect from Boston, and after several weeks of discussion the Board of Aldermen confirmed the committee's choice.

A dissident faction sought an injunction against the project on the grounds that the Proprietors of Common Lands had granted the Common to the town solely for use as a training field. The motives of the plaintiffs, who were represented by Richard Henry Dana Jr., were mixed; some preferred a monument in East Cambridge or Cambridgeport, while a few opposed any commemoration of the war. However, the injunction was soon dissolved, and the groundbreaking took place on June 17, 1869.

The Soldiers Monument was constructed from exceptionally large blocks of New Hampshire granite by Old Cambridge stonecutters Alexander McDonald and Jonathan Mann. A square base with corner buttresses bears plaques listing the names and regiments of the deceased soldiers and is surmounted by a pedimented cupola with elliptical arched openings. Rising from the cupola is a pedestal on which stands a statue of a soldier with his bare head bowed in mourning (Fig. 4).

The centennial celebrations of 1875-76 generated enthusiasm for commemorating the Revolution. Landmarks of the period were decorated, and three 18th-century cannon -- two 32-pounders and a 12-pounder, all of British manufacture -- were installed near the Soldiers Monument. Contrary to legend, the cannon were not among those brought from Fort Ticonderoga by General Knox, but were left behind by the British after the evacuation of Castle William (Fort Independence) in 1776. They had been stored in the State Arsenal on Garden Street, and were spared when thirty-four other obsolete cannon were sold to the South Boston Iron Works in 1848. The cannon were moved to the Garden Street side of the Common in 1976.

More monuments appeared on the Common between the Centennial and World War I. In 1880 the City Council voted to install granite tombstone markers at Revolutionary sites throughout the city. Samuel J. Bridge, a sixth-generation descendent of early settler John Bridge, engaged Thomas Ridgeway Gould, an American sculptor living in Florence, to create a statue of

his ancestor and arranged to have it placed on the northeast corner of the Common in 1882. Some Old Cambridge people objected to this exercise in filial piety, and this was the last representational sculpture erected on the Common proper until the Irish famine memorial in 1997. Bridge also commissioned Daniel Chester French to make the bronze statue of John Harvard now in Harvard Yard.

The Cambridge Park Commission (CPC) took charge of the Common in 1892. The commission's reports describe the difficulty of preventing its use "as a playground for the rough sports of men and boys ... many complaints have been made as to the danger to life and limb to those passing through the Common, and for this reason it is shunned by some of our people who would otherwise gladly use it" (*CPC Annual Report*, 1894, 15). In 1898 the commissioners directed their landscape consultants, Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, to plan improvements. However, there is no evidence that any work was carried out under the firm's direction, and the Common retained its severe character of straight diagonal paths and deciduous trees (Fig. 5).

Private groups and individuals still sought to beautify the Common, but often faced community opposition. In 1904, the Cambridge chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution (not to be confused with the Daughters of the American Revolution) proposed a triumphal arch opposite the Washington Elm. The new Municipal Art Society successfully protested the size and location of the structure, which was built in 1906 on a much smaller scale at the end of the Common facing Harvard Square (Fig. 6).

The three isolated sections of the Common east of Massachusetts Avenue received relatively little attention until 1902, when a statue of Charles Sumner made by Anne Whitney was erected north of Kirkland Street. A native of Watertown who grew up in East Cambridge, Whitney went to Rome after the Civil War to study sculpture and in 1875 entered a competition for a statue of Sumner to be placed in Boston's Public Garden. When the judges learned that the



artist was a woman, they rejected her winning entry in favor of a design by Thomas Ball. In 1900, Whitney had the statue cast at her own expense, and in 1902, "on behalf of a certain unknown donor," Professor Edward Cummings offered it to Cambridge (Ibid., 1902, 6). Sumner (1811-74), an abolitionist and U.S. senator, had strong support in Old Cambridge.

In 1909-12, the two small commons between Massachusetts Avenue and Peabody Street were combined to accommodate a ramp by which streetcars could reach the new Harvard Station. The Boston Elevated Railway faced the walls of the incline with brick to complement the buildings in the Yard and created a plaza for the Sumner statue. During the construction of the subway from Harvard Square to Alewife in 1978-86, the walls were eliminated in an attempt to reunite the Yard and the Common, and the statue of Sumner was moved to a new park opposite Johnston Gate (Fig. 7).

The feature that gives this part of the Common its popular name of Flagstaff Park was commissioned by the Hannah Winthrop Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to replace a flagpole that had stood nearby since 1857. A design with an elaborate bronze base by Boston architect George Lawrence Smith was approved by the Municipal Art Society in 1910, but the commission finally executed in 1913 by Peabody & Stearns had a cast stone base; it commemorates "the suffering and fortitude of the men and women of Cambridge during the Revolution" (Fig. 8).

The Common underwent an astonishing transformation soon after the United States entered World War I. On May 3, 1918, the City Council allowed the U.S. Navy to occupy the Common for a radio school, to be run in conjunction with a training program at Harvard.<sup>2</sup> Thirteen barracks and classroom buildings were erected in July, and the entire Common was

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<sup>2</sup> Cambridge citizens gathered 1,500 names on a petition against this location, but Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the site on May 13 and insisted on its necessity.

enclosed with a high board fence topped with barbed wire (Figs. 9-10). When the barracks were demolished in August 1919, the government paid the city \$13,000 to restore the landscaping. Seventy-three Norway maples eventually superseded the remaining elms, and their denser foliage gave the Common a more forested appearance. After this, the Common received only routine maintenance for several decades. In 1932, Holmes Place and the triangular portion of the Common it enclosed were exchanged with Harvard for a parcel at Cambridge Street and Broadway which the city needed for a new fire station; Littauer Hall was built on part of the land, and Gannett House was turned to face away from the common.

After the war, the Common came under attack from real estate interests. First, pressure mounted to provide parking for nearby hotels and merchants. Half of Flagstaff Park was paved over in 1950, and in 1951 the chairman of the Traffic Board suggested that the Common itself be paved for parking. The City Council initiated a study of an underground garage in 1958, and in 1964-65 the Massachusetts Parking Authority, which had recently completed a 1,400-car garage under Boston Common, offered to build a garage for 1,000 cars under the northwest corner of the Common. This project was finally defeated in 1972. In 1960, Cambridge developer John Briston Sullivan proposed a 15-story building on stilts for Flagstaff Park. This was enthusiastically supported by the City Council, which was desperate for tax revenue, but Governor John Volpe vetoed a bill that would have allowed the city to sell part of the Common.

In the late 1960s, the Common became a destination for disaffected youth from around the country. "Vandalism, panhandling, assaults, bag snatching, and the outdoor sale and use of marijuana" were frequent, as were loud music played at all hours and concerts that drew thousands of young people (*Chronicle*, July 23, 1970). Riots on April 15 and July 25, 1970, brought proposals to ban the concerts, but instead the city refurbished the Common to accommodate them. A project designed by the Cambridge firm of Mason & Frey paved a broad

area around the Soldiers Monument, closed several entrances, and relocated many of the paths (Fig. 11). The monument became an impromptu bandstand until the Historical Commission installed a new iron fence around it in 1991. New path alignments cut across old allées of trees, or left them leading nowhere. In 1976 the original granite setting of the Washington Elm bas-relief was discarded, and most of the monuments were grouped around the cannon in a kind of historical theme park near Garden Street (Fig. 12).

In 1975, descendants of William Dawes asked the city to recognize their ancestor, who had marched through Cambridge on the night of April 18, 1775 to warn the patriots of the British advance on Concord and Lexington. The Historical Commission proposed that a traffic island at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Garden Street be redesigned as a commemorative park. An 18<sup>th</sup> century-style horseshoe forged at Old Sturbridge Village provided the mold for the bronze hoof prints of Dawes' mount; explanatory markers stand nearby.

The most recent monument on Cambridge Common commemorates the Irish famine of 1845-50. Designed by Irish artist Maurice Harron, the figurative depiction of emaciated victims caused intense controversy when it was proposed in 1996.

Cambridge Historical Commission  
September 17, 2009



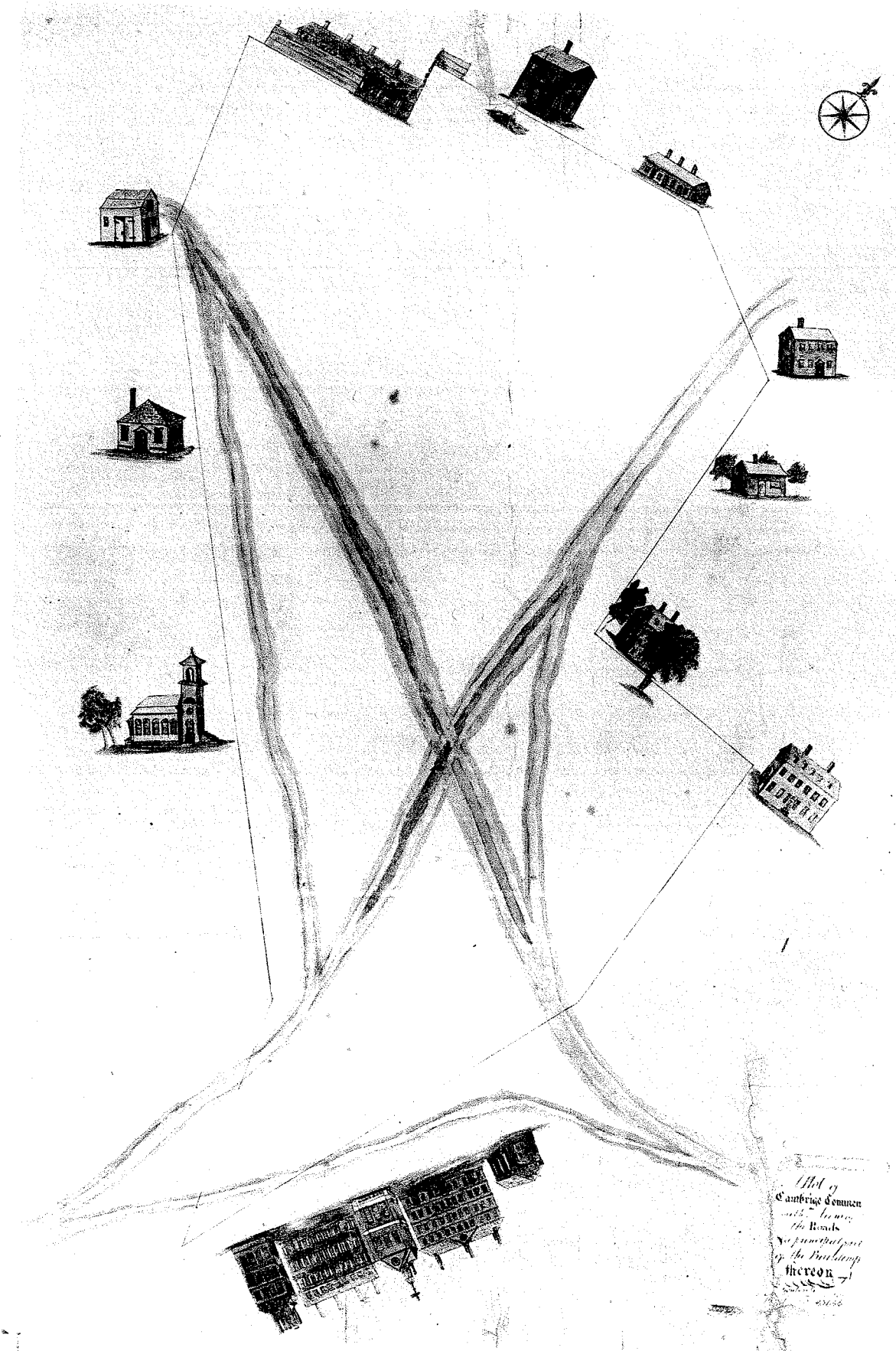
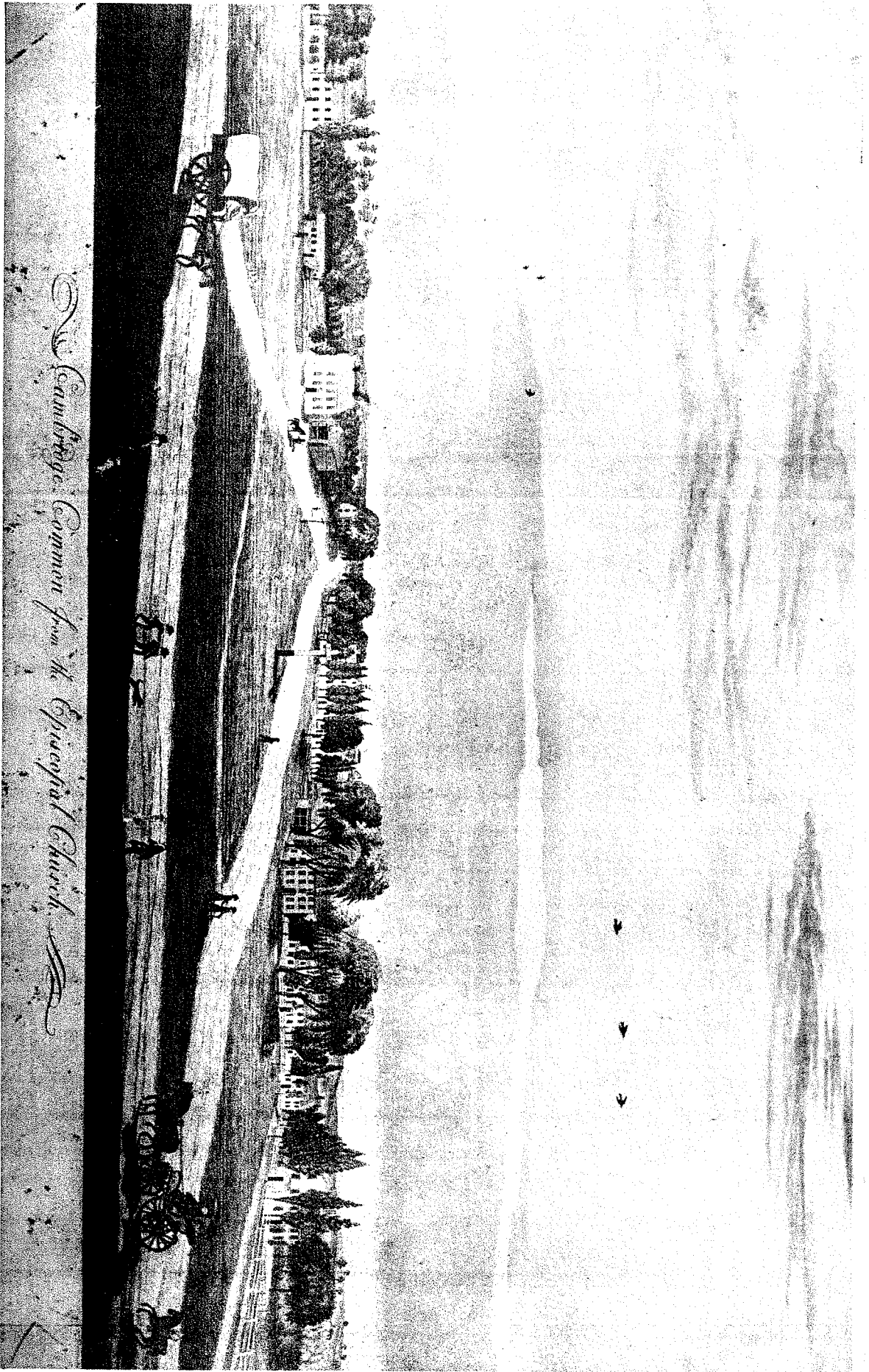


Fig. 1. Cambridge Common in 1781



*Cambridge Common from the Episcopal Church*

Cambridge Common from the Episcopal Church

Fig. 2.

Water Color, c. 1805 by Bell, view from Christ Church looking  
up Menotomy Road, now Massachusetts Avenue.  
Harvard College Library, Houghton.  
Reproduced in color by Mereden Gouvre

Fig 3. Enclave Survey, 1830

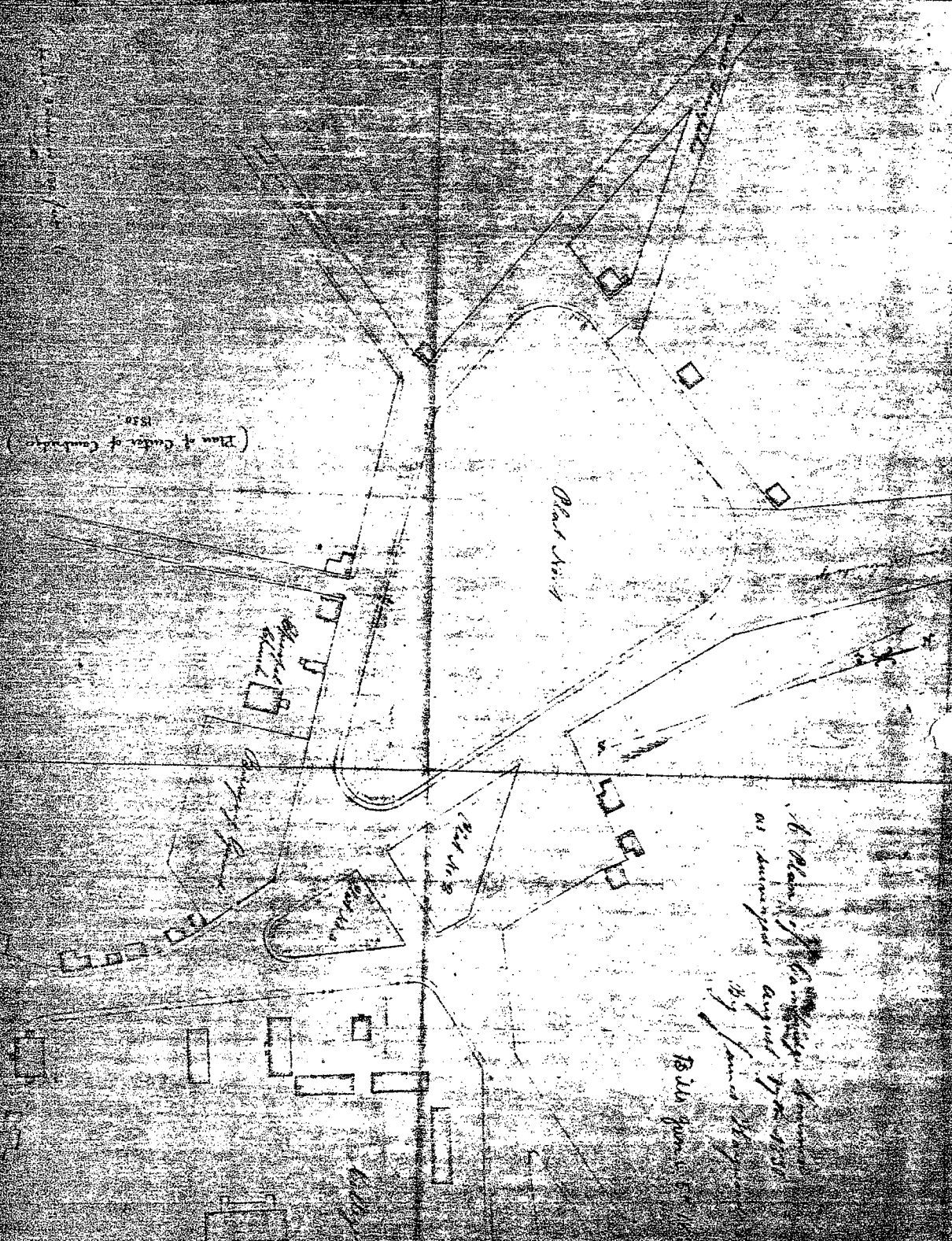


Fig 4. Civil War monument, 1870





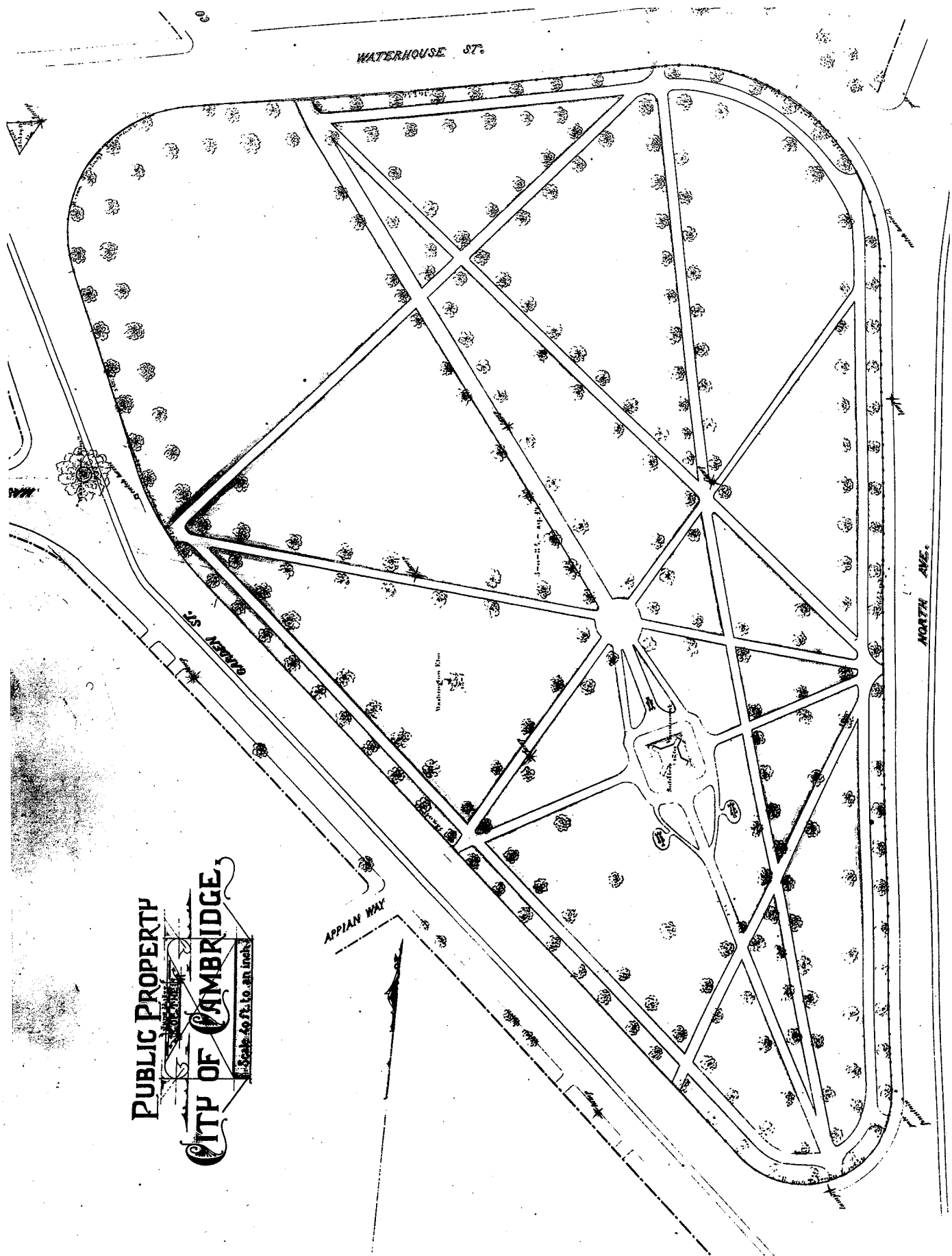
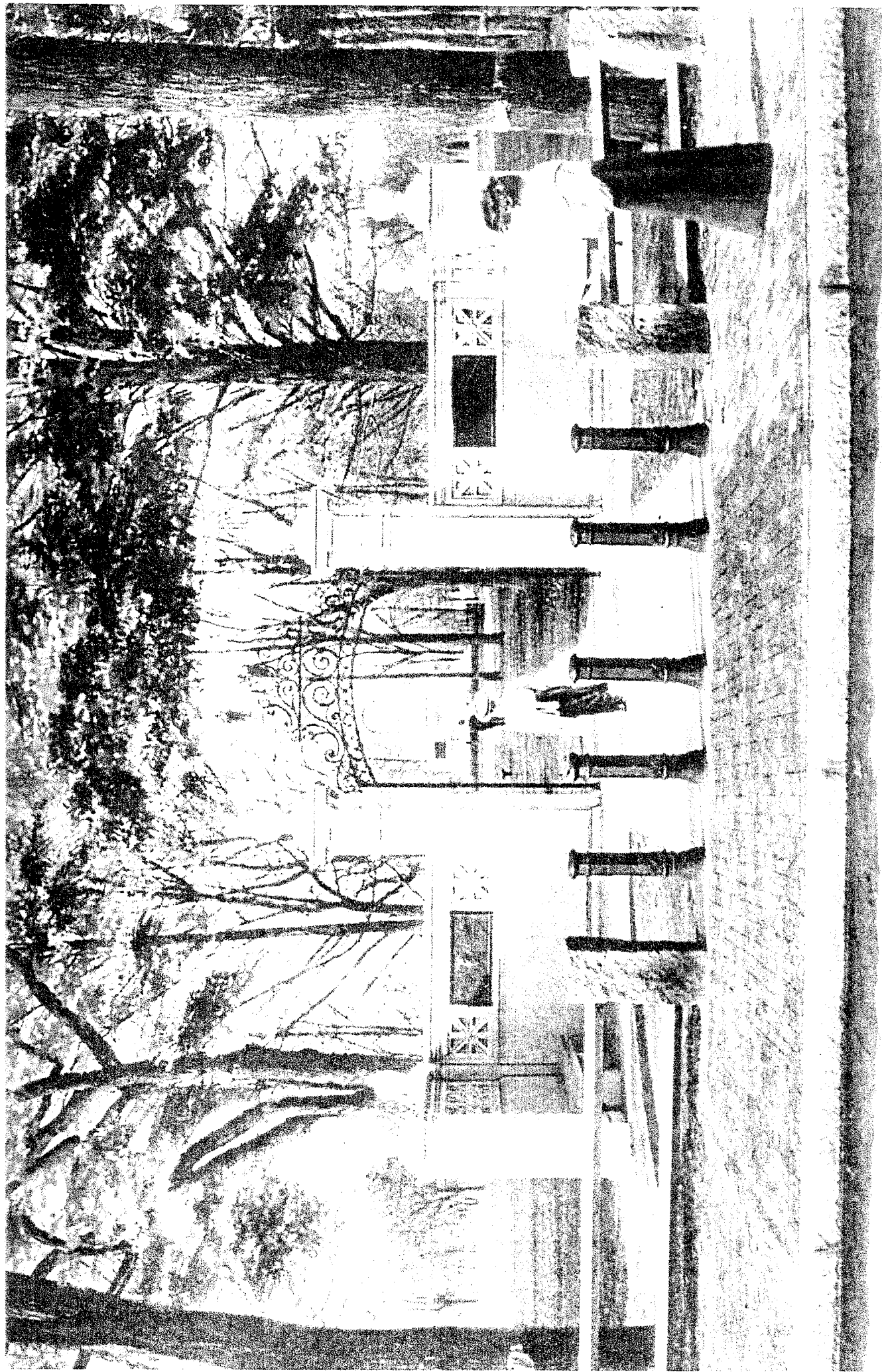


Fig 5. Cambridge Common as surveyed in 1877.



Cambridge, Mass. Entrance to Cambridge Common.

*Fig. 6. Washington Gate, 1906*

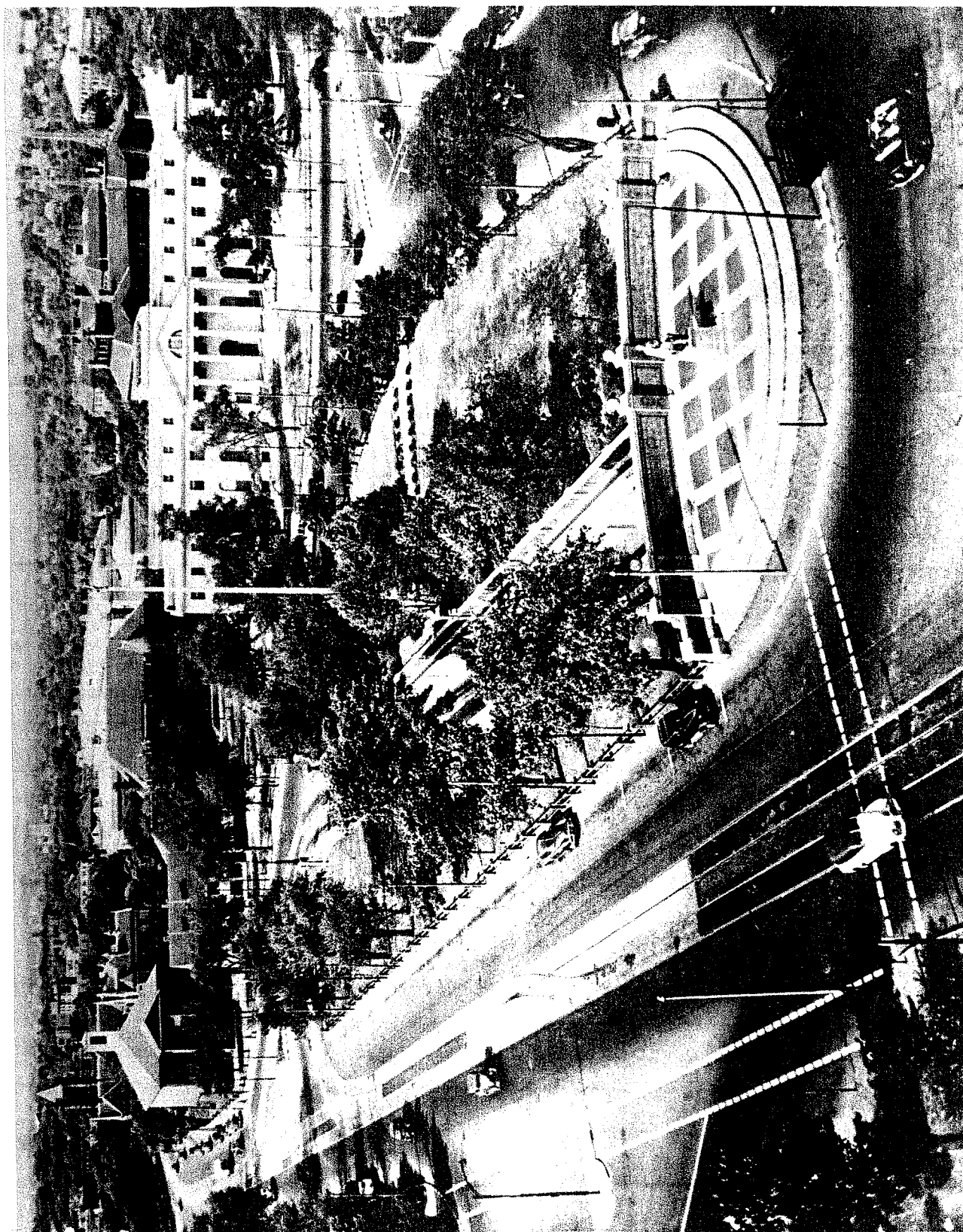


Fig 7. Flagstaff Park as redesigned in 1909-12. Photo ca. 1940.

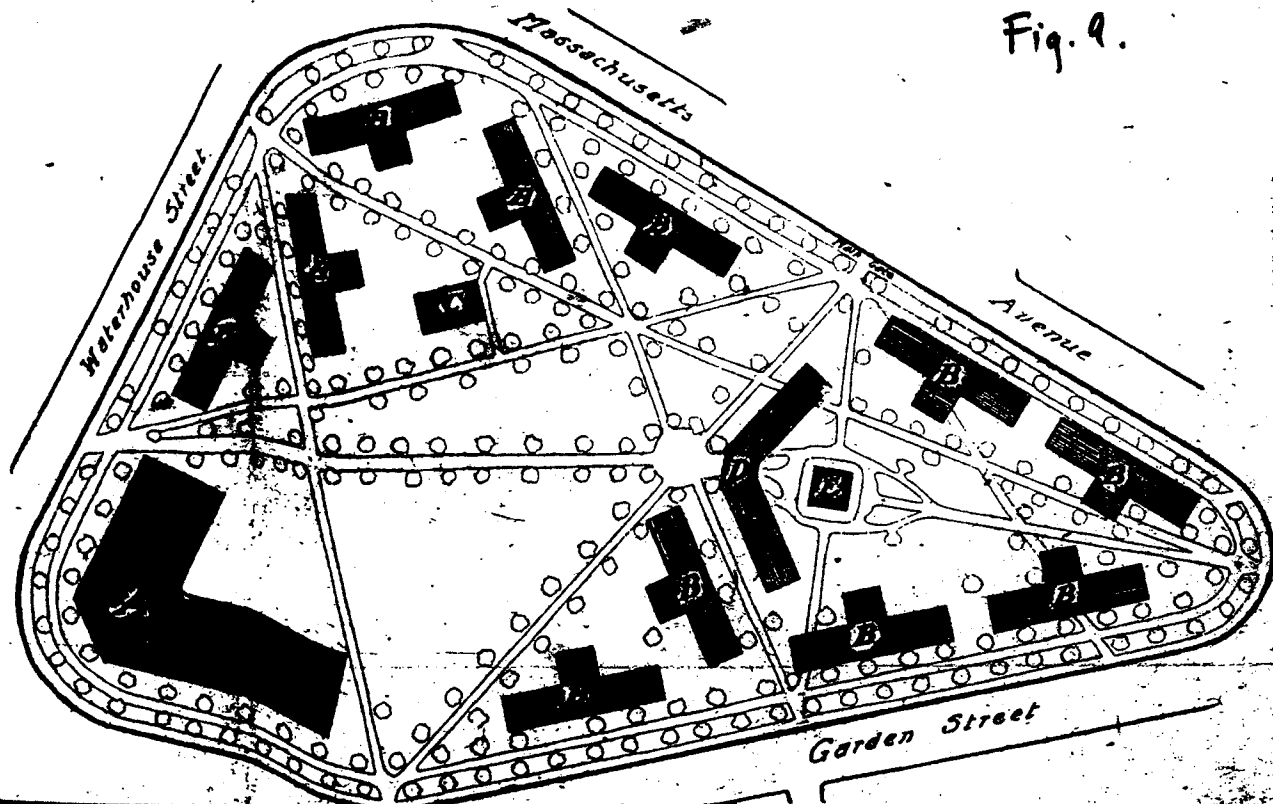


Fig. 8. Memorial flagstaff, Flagstaff Park, 1913. Photo 2608.



# ARRANGEMENT OF RADIO BARRACKS AS PLANNED FOR CAMBRIDGE COMMON

Fig. 9.



## Page & Shaw Confections

WE HAVE A FULL LINE

Our SODA tastes good at this time

BILLINGS & SLOVER, Pharmacians

Harvard Square

## WALTER BABINEAU WRITES FROM FRANCE

North Cambridge Young Man Tells of Some Interesting Experiences Overseas—His First Trip to the Front—Description of an Air Raid

A. Walter Babineau, son of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas S. Babineau, of 72 Burter road, who is now serving in Co. A, of the 101st Ambulance train, is writing some very interesting letters from

## MAYOR QUINN MAKES RE-APPOINTMENTS

City Council Suspends the White and Confirms All but One of the Nominations—Another Reception to Draftees—Hogan Wants Government to Build Houses for Workers

Mayor Quinn sent to the city council at its meeting Tuesday night a number of appointments of officials, all of whom were confirmed.

A committee was appointed to arrange for a reception to the next quota of draftees who are to leave Cambridge May 15, and a committee to co-operate with business organizations in an effort to get an appropriation from the government to build some houses for munition workers in Cambridge.

A hearing was ordered for next Tuesday on the petitions against the granting of motor licenses in Cambridge this year.

The ordinance in amendment of the building ordinance so as to permit the erection of wooden barracks for the Harvard Radio school on Cambridge common was passed to be enacted and ordained.

From the Mayor

The mayor sent in a veto of the order adopted April 25 granting first class garage license to the Walker-Johnson Motor Co. because the company had not complied with the law in reference to garages. Tabled for one week.

The mayor sent in a communication in reference to the request for an appropri-

(Continued on Page Ten)

## COMMON OPPOSITION QUICKLY DISPOSED OF

Assistant Secretary of Navy Roosevelt Explains That Not Only Will the Common Be Needed for the Navy, but It Will Be Needed for the Army and Several prominent citizens carefully went over the proposed sites for the new Radio School camp, which is intended to cover the 100 acres.

After a detailed investigation of the common, it was decided that not only the common must be used as planned for its first place, but the Palfrey estate and a large part of the Ashover Theological seminary grounds will also be required.

Assistant Secretary Roosevelt, himself a Harvard man, attended the meeting of the Harvard overseers Monday morning. On the steps of the building he was met by Judge Robert Walcott, Sen. George H. Carrick, C. H. Blackman, the architect John Nolen and later by Sen. Brewster Everett. Mr. Roosevelt greeted them cordially and told them he would be glad to go over their proposed plans and hear their ideas on the problem.

Then the group started for the common. Mr. Roosevelt was accompanied by Rear Admiral Spencer H. Wood, commander of the first naval district, and Lieutenant-Commander Nathaniel Ayer, commandant of the U. S. Naval Radio school at Harvard. The ground plan for the common was brought out and the heads of officials and the Cambridge citizens discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed location of the camp.

Representative Carrick presented the assistant secretary of the navy with a petition signed by 100 Cambridge citizens asking that, if it were possible, the new camp be placed elsewhere than on the common.

After the common was sufficiently scrutinized the investigators went over to the Palfrey estate. As the automobiles swung through the gateways a bugle sounded and several scores of jacks jumped to attention to greet their distinguished officers. Again on the Palfrey estate and on the seminary grounds the group went over more plans. Mr. Roosevelt was the most courteous of individuals all through the inspection, listening attentively to all that the citizens had to say, and going carefully over their plans and maps. Every now and then, however,

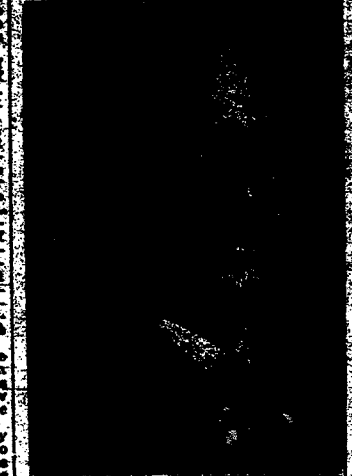
(Continued on Page Ten)

## LIBRARIAN'S REPORT TO BOARD TRUSTEES

Work of Year Ending March 31, 1918. Statement of Circulation During the Year at Central Library and Branches. Was 245,384 Books.

The report of Librarian T. Harrison Cummings to the trustees of the Cambridge Public Library for the year ending March 31, 1918, follows:

There has been much that a public li-



T. HARRISON CUMMINGS.  
Librarian

brary is only a collection of books, administered for the public by trained experts; that its efficiency can be gauged by the amount and quality of books available both for reference and circulation; finally, that its usefulness can always be defined by the number and intelligence of its borrowers. Measured by these standards the Cambridge Public Library, while not in the front rank with the big metropolitan libraries of the country, is still to be found high up on the sculptured pillar among the smaller and less pretentious libraries of the com-



Fig 10. Barracks on Cambridge Common, 1918.

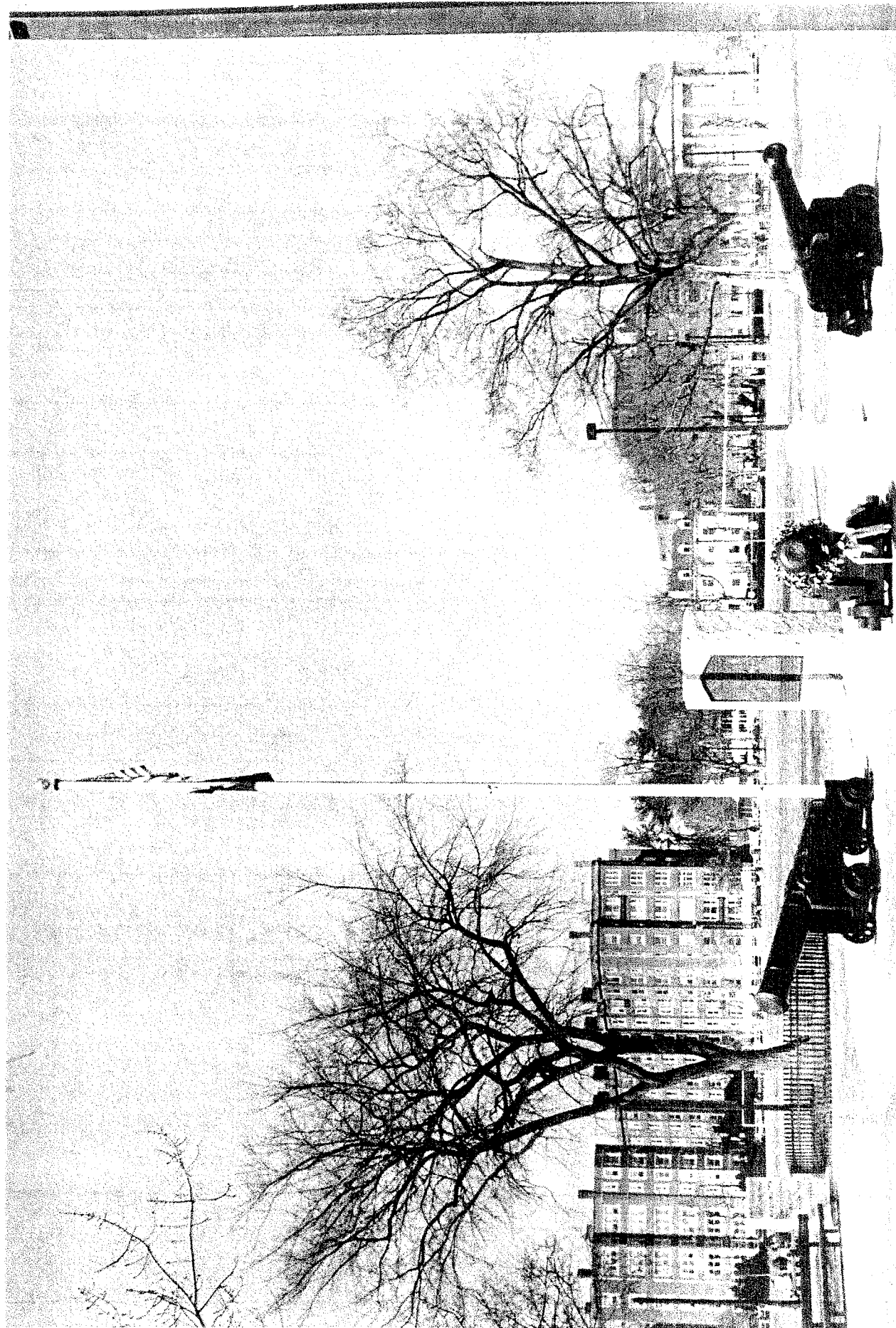


Fig 17. Cambridge Common. Ticonderoga Cannon, March, 1988.

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Fig. 11. Existing Conditions Plan